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Why All the Secrets?

Oddly enough, while the Kremlin's agents will beg, borrow and steal American secrets—or simply interpret them from government publications and statements—arms control summits often give the Soviets their best intelligence information.

U.S. officials have acknowledged this privately to us, but they insist it's necessary to disclose to the Soviets the CIA's best estimates of their weapons systems—estimates that are withheld from the American public on grounds of national security. The officials explain that the two sides in the negotiations have to agree on the nature and number of Soviet weapons before they can agree on any limitations. And the Soviets are unlikely to volunteer the information.

Ironically, the Soviet negotiators often hear secrets about their weapons systems that they consider too sensitive for the ears of junior members of the negotiating team.

This elitist notion—that top officials of the adversary superpowers are more to be trusted than the ignorant masses—is one of the few philosophical tenets that the U.S. and Soviet governments share. Like the important details of the recent summit, most U.S.-Soviet talks are classified "secret," which by definition means that their disclosure would supposedly cause serious risk to our national security. And the lid is kept tightly clamped for months, years and even decades.

We've come a long way from Woodrow Wilson's earnest faith in "open covenants . . . openly arrived at." Experience showed, unfortunately, that Wilson's dream of open negotiations could easily disintegrate into propaganda and posturing under the pressure of clashing interests. But there is little reason to keep the negotiations that preceded an agreement secret once the deal has been signed.

Yet that is what has become the orthodox procedure in postwar diplomacy, under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger even had the audacity to formulate a historically questionable dictum on the subject: "All of the great agreements that have been reached . . . have been negotiated in secret." (That quotation, incidentally, is taken from a "confidential" 1976 document that is still classified.)

There is often no rhyme or reason to the official secrecy that still clings to past negotiations. Those who ask for memoranda from the SALT I and SALT II negotiations under the Freedom of Information Act, for example, are routinely denied a huge quantity of the material. Whole pages of "top secret" passages are deleted, even though the material has been used in several books by historians—as well as in the memoirs of former presidents and Kissinger himself.

The problem has less to do with national security than with the desire of every administration to have history recorded in its favor.

How else to explain why the exchanges between the U.S. ambassador in Warsaw and the communist Chinese envoy in 1970 are still classified? Those who have read the memos, as we have, know that President Nixon's famous "China opening" was actually nailed down in Warsaw—not in Shanghai two years later, when Kissinger supposedly burned the midnight oil to draft the communiqué. Kissinger, of course, wasn't in Poland for the 1970 negotiations.

And why are the negotiations over the Cuban missile crisis still classified "secret" and "top secret" after 23 years? We've had a peek at some of the 1962 documents, and they reveal that President Kennedy didn't get the airtight agreement from the Soviets that the public was led to believe he did. Wouldn't it be helpful for the public to know what went on, rather than be rudely surprised by some Soviet action in the Caribbean?

A final irony is that secrecy is officially guaranteed in the rules of the U.S.-Soviet commission that reviews allegations of violations. The proceedings can't be made public unless both sides agree.

In other words, information being withheld on grounds that its disclosure would hurt national security will remain secret as long as the greatest single threat to that security wants it to be secret.